1990

Sexual difference and industrial relations research

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Working Paper 90-2
August 1990

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ISSN 1025-4581
ISBN 0-84418-106-X

Introduction

Prior to the mid 1970s scholars in the discipline of women's studies, tended to be dismissive of those who claimed that biological differences between the sexes were of great social significance. Since this period, however, this tendency has become much less pronounced with numerous scholars arguing that analysts need to give serious consideration to studying the manner and extent to which men and women differ biologically. It is argued that examination of this question is necessary if our understanding of women's social position is to be advanced. This intellectual development constitutes a significant departure from the previous prevalent position in women's studies. It is also a shift away from many of the ideas accepted in other social science disciplines. In most areas of relevant industrial relations research, for example, it is normally accepted that apart from the ability to give birth there are no major biological differences between men and women that seriously influence the specifics of the employment relationship. A recent example of the state of play within the discipline was provided by the Autumn 1989 edition of the Industrial Relations Journal. This was a special edition dedicated to the study of women in the employment relationship. None of the contributors, however, appear to be aware of the developments in women's studies as regards the study of the social significance of sexual difference for this issue did not even rate a mention.

The general disregard of sexual difference in academic industrial relations research is a matter of concern. In this particular area it would appear to be the case that the discipline is simply not keeping up with developments in relevant associated fields. To help overcome this failing a brief history of how the debate on sexual difference has developed in women's studies is provided, in this paper. The paper also provides an example of an area of study where the issue of sexual difference has direct relevance for industrial relations researchers.

Cultural and Biological Determinism

The history of the post-1975 acceptance of socially significant biological differences between the sexes, within women's studies and within the women's movement, has been recorded by Eisenstein (1984) and Segal (1987). In the early 1970s, Eisenstein reports,

theoreticians tended to argue that socially constructed differences between the sexes, rather than biological differences, were the chief source of women's subservient social position. Primary attention within the discipline was focused on clarifying the distinction between sex and gender and on developing an understanding of how sex roles may be utilised as a means of social control. That there are differences between men and women that significantly influence their relative social positions was not denied by these scholars. Indeed, as it was widely believed that these differences were primarily a product of men's cultural domination of society and of their conscious and unconscious discrimination against women, it was considered necessary to highlight the existence of these differences in order to eliminate the inequalities upon which they were based. Exposing the cultural nature of these sources of difference between men and women, it was believed, was a necessary step in the creation of a society where the sexes would be treated as equal in all spheres of life.

The successful development of the scientific study of women's social position required women's studies scholars to come to grips with biology if they were to refute successfully the claims of those fatalists who argued that male-female relations are an inevitable and unchangeable function of their respective biologies. Given that the biological sciences have been extensively utilised as a means of buttressing male domination it was imperative that those who were opposed to this situation engage in a systematic and thorough dialogue with specialists in the various biological sciences. Unfortunately however, in the early years of the discipline, few women's studies analysts were willing to engage in a debate of this nature. They tended rather either to ignore the issue of biology or merely assert that biological differences had no inherent social relevance. It was argued that rather than the facts of biology being important determinants in the shaping of social structures or processes it was the cultural interpretation of these facts that was significant. By cultural interpretation these writers meant the meaning and significance that a society chooses to place on a social phenomenon. While the biological determinist insists that the facts of biological difference inevitably outweigh the influence of historical specificity, the cultural determinist argues that these facts have no inherent significance. All that is significant is how society elects to perceive these facts. As Brown and Jordanova characteristically put it, "[W]hat

cultures make of sex differences is almost infinitely variable, so that biology cannot be playing a determining role. Men and women are products of social relations..." (cited by Curthoys 1988:130).

The cultural determinist position was accepted by virtually all scholars involved in women's studies in the early 1970s. The occasional dissenting individual tended to be ignored or, as with the example of Firestone (1970), was dismissed as a biological determinist. Retention of this position, however, proved extremely difficult to sustain both intellectually and strategically. At the intellectual level, as Curthoys (1988:130) has noted, it placed scholars in a position where they had to deny that biology could be a significant explanatory factor, in the development of any aspect of society no matter what the contrary evidence. This was a position which became increasingly difficult to sustain intellectually as the analysis of women's condition advanced through the 1970s. Retention of cultural determinism also became strategically difficult for those within women's studies who wished to advance the social position of women. Cultural determinism required not only the explicit rejection of claims that males had any biological advantages that might help to explain their dominant social position: it also required the demeaning of those biological attributes clearly unique to women, such as the capacity to give birth. As a consequence of this need to minimise the significance of the body, Elshtain (1987;145) observes, one finds "repeated expressions of contempt for the female body" throughout the literature of the cultural determinists. This demeaning of women's unique biological capacities con to enhance women's self esteem, a development which was critical to the advancement of their social position.

A further difficulty for the cultural determinist perspective was created by the very success the women's movement managed to attain in the early 1970s. Capitalist society proved capable of accommodating many of the demands for equal rights put forward by the women's movement. Indeed, as Eisenstein (1984:xi) notes, as a consequence of their success in generating popular debate around the issue of anti-female discrimination, women were widely encouraged both to overcome the defects of their feminine conditioning and to enter those areas of public life traditionally denied them. Many employers, for

example, proved more than willing to adopt policies that treated the applicant for a job as a 'person' rather than as a man or woman. This accommodation was both limited and selective. Even so the reforms attained were sufficient to satisfy the demands of many women or at least sufficient to undermine their degree of militant enthusiasm for further social change. Women who wished to struggle for even greater reforms consequently, found themselves somewhat isolated from what had been their constituency.

The difficulties created for the women's movement by society's willingness to grant a few of its more immediate demands, was not a unique development. It was a problem that invariably confronts all movements for social reform that achieve any significant degree of success. The selective granting of those of the movement's demands that are of particular importance to the social group it represents, but which are not at all incompatible with the basic structure of society, can severely undermine the popular support of those of the movement's members who wish to see more radical change. It is particularly difficult in such situations for radicals to retain the active support of the nonmilitant and those who have become involved merely to attain limited goals. In a number of ways this situation is analogous to that which developed in the early years of the labour movement.

Initially, employers and their sympathisers within the state strongly resisted workers' attempts to form industrial and political organisations which would enable them to promote effectively their interests within capitalism. This often violent resistance enabled radicals to pose workers' reform demands in a manner which challenged the very existence of this social system. If workers were not to be allowed a minimally acceptable strategic position within capitalism, the radicals were often able persuasively to argue, they had no other choice but to widen their horizons by turning to socialism. The appeal that this argument had for many workers enabled the radicals to gain important leadership positions within the labour movement. Ironically, however, this development tended in the long term to undermine the appeal these individuals enjoyed within the working class. It injected enormous fear into the ranks of the bourgeoisie thus making this class more amenable to demands for reforms that were compatible with capitalism. At the same time it enhanced the theoretical sophistication of the labour movement in a manner which enabled its leaders to structure and advance their

immediate demands in a form which could exploit the bourgeoisie's fears successfully. Workers consequently gained an enhanced capacity to advance their interests within capitalism a development which enhanced the prestige of the socialists but at the same time undermined the argument that only socialism could improve the workers' social position. One historically important result of this development was the emergence of a split, within the labour movement, between those willing to accept a reformed capitalism and those who continued to insist that the only satisfactory objective was socialism. For the latter the improved situation of the working class created a severe crisis. Workers' awareness of themselves as an exploited group, the defence of which required class identification and solidarity, proved extremely difficult to sustain in an environment of rising living standards, improved opportunities and enhanced even if limited democracy. Radicals consequently, were forced to seek out other issues around which they could encourage mass organisational and ideological opposition to capitalism. In this latter endeavour they have thus far been decidedly unsuccessful.

The Acceptance of Biology

The crisis that emerged in the women's movement in the 1970s had similar repercussions to that experienced in the organised working class. Once a few of the more blatant forms of anti-female discrimination were modified or removed, the level of agreement over just what were the goals of the movement was weakened. This resulted both in debates over theoretical and practical issues becoming increasingly bitter and in increased organisational fragmentation. For those many women who were by no means satisfied with what men had thus far been willing to concede, there was now a problem of how to encourage women to retain a feminist consciousness and to identify themselves as an exploited sector of society. Resolution of this problem was made particularly difficult by the cultural determinist argument that there are no relevant biological differences between males and females. If this was the case then why did women need to identify themselves specifically as women in the new environment feminism had helped to create? What was needed in this situation was an analytic perspective which encouraged women to view

themselves as being collectively bonded by some factor that rendered them inherently different from men. The consequence, both of these strategic needs and of the intellectual difficulties associated with crude anti-biologism, was a gradual waning in the popularity of cultural determinism and the concomitant acceptance of the need for women's studies theoreticians to engage in a dialogue with the biological sciences.

> Beginning in the mid-1970s the view of female difference from men began to change. Instead of being considered the source of women's oppression, these differences were now judged to contain the seeds of women's liberation. As outlined by the historian Gerda Lerner, the poet Adrienne Rich, and others, the woman centred perspective located specific virtues in the historical and psychological experience of women. Instead of seeking to minimize the polarization between masculine and feminine, it sought to isolate and to define those aspects of female experience that were potential sources of strength and power for women, and, more broadly, of a new blueprint for social change (Eisenstein 1984: xi-xii).

Scholars within women's studies who argued for the recognition of sexual difference initially encountered intense opposition from those individuals who insisted that to deviate from a total commitment to androgyny and anti-biologism opened a gap through which the full flood of biological fatalism could flow. It was asserted that to specify biological features of human existence and incorporate these into an overall explanation of male-female relations "is to slide, irrevocably, into some sort of universalist, totalist, or ontological trap [and to be guilty of] embracing the notion that there are rigid, fixed 'innate' givens in human nature that appear invariantly and identically in all times and in all places (Elshtain 1987:147)."

Those scholars who recognised that women's studies simply had to engage in a dialogue with the biological sciences, however, replied that the claims of the cultural determinists were invalid. It might be true, it was acknowledged, that such a debate might place analysts in a position where they would be forced to concede the existence of biological

determinations. It was also observed, however, that this in no way meant they would consequently have to concede that women can have no control over their destiny, that human beings cannot change the way society is organised or that what is determinant in a given environment must be universally determinant. Moreover, the fact that certain biological differences between men and women were capable of being utilised, indeed have been utilised, as a means for maintaining inequality between the sexes in the past, does not mean that these differences can serve the same purpose in an environment so changed they no longer have material relevance. Women's studies, it was argued, must seek to determine both the true nature of biological differences and the role these differences have played within history. Until this was done individuals who supported sexual equality would always have to live in fear of those who would use the biological sciences to show that women were forever destined to a position of subservience.

The essence of the argument of those who would systematically confront biology has been eloquently expressed by Curthoys in her discussion of the need to acknowledge that differences between the sexes must surely have shaped, to some extent, the traditional division of childminding in the family. Curthoys ardently opposes the use of biological difference to justify the continuation of a situation where women have primary responsibility for childminding. At the same time, however, she argues that in constructing an historical explanation of the woman-childcare association, as it has existed and continues to exist, it is necessary to take into full consideration sex-based biological differences. When confronted by such a universal pattern as that which exists between mother and child, she insists, the only basis for universality lies in the human body. Cultural determinism, Curthoys argues, is ultimately very hard to sustain for it seems impossible to believe that woman's association with childcaring has, historically, nothing to do with their singular capacity to give birth and to lactate. To adequately conceive of the social arrangements which surround human reproduction in a manner which is blind to its biological duality, Curthoys' concludes, is simply not possible. What should be possible, she argues, is to give sex-based biological difference a place in the study of women that does not condemn this sex to perpetual subservience and that recognises cultural and historical specificity.

It should be possible to give sex-based biological difference a role in history, without allowing it to be seen as inescapable, and therefore a guideline, a prescription, for the future. It is not, however, necessary to give it a role conceptualised as distinct from that of social and historical determination. The strength and forms of sexual division will depend not on biological difference itself, but on the nature of the society in question, on its accumulated historical traditions, its mode of production, its political structure, and its ideological, religious, and cultural practices (Curthoys 1988:133).

The point that sexual difference in itself, does influence the nature of social relations but always does so in a particular social context has also been stressed by Midgley (1988) in an incisive paper titled 'On Not Being Afraid of Natural Sex Differences', which she published in a volume dealing with feminist perspectives in philosophy. Midgley observes that those feminists who bring forward biological causes to help explain women's position in society do not suppose that these factors can by themselves replace social causes.

They merely supplement them, as the original qualities of food supplement the effects of cooking in accounting for the properties of the finished dish (Midgley 1988:38).

She observes, moreover, that human beings have little more control over the way they are brought up than they do over their genetic constitution. Cultural determinism therefore does not offer a degree of freedom markedly different from that offered by biological determinism. She concludes consequently:

> What is called 'biological determinism' is not more of an attack on freedom than the social determinism (or economic determinism) which is accepted without moral qualms throughout the social sciences. What is injurious is not determinism but fatalism - that is, the pretence that bad things which are in fact within our control lie outside it and are incurable (1988:39).

Sexual Difference and Industrial Relations

By the middle years of the 1980s the debate between the cultural determinists and those willing to engage in a dialogue with the biological sciences had radically undermined

the unquestioning acceptance the former had previously enjoyed in women's studies. By this period much research within the discipline and within other disciplines, such as philosophy, was moving beyond merely debating whether natural differences between the sexes actually exist. Rather, debate was beginning to concentrate on identifying the nature of these differences and attempting to determine their social significance and how they might relate to cultural determinants. This development has important implications for certain areas of industrial relations research. As suggested earlier, however, it would appear to be the case that discussion of the gender issue in academic industrial relations has not kept up with the changing nature of the debate. With few exceptions, industrial relations researchers undertaking studies in related areas remain committed to an unquestioning acceptance of the cultural determinist perspective.

In stating that the issue of sexual difference is relevant to certain areas of industrial relations research the types of issues which come to mind include the analysis of the sexual division of labour, the male-female wage gap, the study of the role played by discrimination within trade unions and in the work place and health and safety. This last is probably the area that requires the most immediate attention because here we are talking in terms of employees' life and limb. Ironically, it is also the one area of industrial life where sexual difference has already attracted a great deal of study. Research in this area, however, has tended to be undertaken not so much by industrial relations academics as by scholars in the fields of industrial medicine, industrial psychology and applied ergonomics. Study of the industrial relevance of sexual difference by scholars, in these fields, has been stimulated first, by the employers who have wished to minimise the human and economic cost of injuries and accidents. The second source of stimulation has been the trade unions which have wanted to both minimise discrimination and protect the physical and material wellbeing of their members.

It is the fact that it has been the unions which have stimulated much of the research into the health and safety implications of sexual difference that gives this issue a degree of urgency. This is because there can be little doubt that the trade unions in Australia have lost a great deal of their former capacity to protect the interests of their members. Given

this is the case there is a need for academic industrial relations scholars to undertake some of the activities in the area of health and safety which previously could be left to the unions. Should, for example, the fervour for deregulation presently gripping many employers, government officials and parliamentarians spread to the area of sex-based health and safety legislation it would be incumbent upon us to demand that the issue of sexual difference be explicitly taken into consideration, before any modifications to such laws are adopted. Certainly, this would have to be done if the trade unions were to prove incapable of presenting such a demand successfully. That this is likely to be an area of contention, it needs to be noted, is not merely a hypothetical possibility. Already there is a significant disjunction of opinions between Worksafe Australia and the Equal Opportunities Commission as to the extent to which health and safety laws should be exempted from the provisions of the Equal Opportunities Act. Industrial relations researchers should be willing and able to make an input into this disagreement. If nothing else, they should have something useful to say as to the ability of workers to defend their health and safety interests without the assistance of the state.

For more than interest sake it should be added that were academic industrial relations scholars to take up the role suggested such an action would not be without precedent. For amongst the pioneers of the discipline this was considered an activity of some importance. Beatrice Webb (1896), for example, placed great significance on the issue of sexual difference in her defence of the Factory Acts. For Webb, natural differences between the sexes was a critical factor explaining the nature of the sexual division of labour and the relative bargaining power and respective capacity to unionise of men and women. She also considered the existence of natural differences between males and females to be a substantive justification for many sex-specific labour laws. It is conceded that Webb's opinions are subject to debate. The important point, however, is that she was willing to pay this issue the attention it deserves. We have an intellectual and moral duty to do likewise. Fortunately, the developments in the field of women's studies outlined in this paper have now created an intellectual environment in which this should be possible.

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